

LA DAME BLANCHE.

I.

The representation of Boieldieu's opera at the Theatre Royal, in this city, has revived the memory of his works. Among the principal of these is "La Dame Blanche," one of the most popular operas of the French school. It is in constant rehearsal on all the stages of Europe, and last season was produced at the London Gaiety with extraordinary success. For some reason or other, it has hitherto been almost unknown in the United States, but I was gratified to read the announcement that Clara Louise Kellogg intended including it in her repertory during the present season. The whole series of French comic opera, as distinguished from grand opera, on the one hand, and opera bouffe on the other, is a mine of musical wealth, which it would pay any enterprising *impresario* to open and develop for the benefit of the American public. This kind of composition is not necessarily comic, as its name would imply, but its characteristic is that spoken dialogue alternates with *couplets* parts and that the recitatives are declaimed, not sung. The only opera of that class with which we have hitherto been made acquainted in this country is Auber's "Fra Diavolo," and both the dramatic effects and charming melodies of that work ought to stimulate our relish for other compositions akin to it. Germany, Russia and England are much more appreciative. In the former country, French Opera-Comique has always retained a place of honour, and among the favourite impersonations of Wachtel, who was among us last winter, is the hero of Adolphe Adam's "Postillion de Longjumeau." In Russia Boieldieu resided for ten years, and his "Calipe de Bagdad," so well known everywhere by its richly wrought overture, is a stock piece at the Imperial Opera House of St. Petersburg. No season is considered complete in London without the reproduction of Herold's "Zampa" or Halévy's "La Juive."

Some of the greatest composers of Europe, recognizing the peculiar merits of the French school, and the avenues it opens to distinction, have contrived to associate their names therewith. Cherubini wrote his "Deux Journées," Rossini his "Comte Ory," Meyerbeer, his "Parion de Ploerme," Flotow, his "Martha," Donizetti, his "Fille du Regiment," for the French stage. The best of Balfe's works were composed for the same scene, and, indeed, the famous Irishman's genius bore the unmistakable stamp of the French spirit.

As I have said, "La Dame Blanche" is a masterpiece. It is founded on simple material, but romantic and dramatic incidents abound, thanks to the wonderful skill of Scribe who was the librettist. This man had an instinct of the stage which amounted to intuition, and it is doubtful whether his place will ever be successfully filled. He gauged exactly the peculiar talent of all the composers for whom he wrote, and adapted his situations, and even the cut of his strophes, so as to lead them on and inspire them, instead of following in their wake. His name will share the immortality of Rossini's "Guillaume Tell," Meyerbeer's "Robert Le Diable," Auber's "Maître de Portici," Adam's "Châlet," and Boieldieu's "Dame Blanche."

The tradition of the White Lady is entertained in several of the oldest royal families of Europe and has passed into literature. The Stuarts, in the day of disaster, were haunted by the snowy phantom; Louis XVI. referred mournfully to the visitation on the eve of his death; it is seen gliding at critical intervals through the palace of the House of Orange, and it is only the other day that we read of a Hohenzollern having caught a glimpse of it in a leafy avenue at Sans Souci. Sir Walter Scott has made imperishable the White Lady of Avenel, and it is from him that Scribe took the idea of his libretto. When he went to Boieldieu with the manuscript, he found the master hard at work on a poem of the old school by Bouilly, which he had the utmost difficulty to convert into musical language. The work was "Les Deux Nuits," written by the pedantic old poet as a pendant to "Les Deux Journées," which, with the co-operation of Cherubini's score, had achieved a great success some thirty years previous. Fortunately for our two young authors, the tenor, Martin, to whom the principal character of Bouilly's opera was consecrated, retired from the stage at this time, and, as he could not possibly be replaced, Boieldieu found himself at liberty to undertake the book of Scribe. The task was of the most congenial nature, and he proceeded through the first two acts with the rush of inspiration. He had more trouble with the third and concluding act. It is always interesting to trace the steps through which masterpieces of art and literature have been executed, and in the present instance we are fortunate enough to have an account of Boieldieu's troubles from his favourite pupil, Adam, the co-author of "Le Postillion" and "Le Brasseur de Preston."

II.

Boieldieu, like Rossini, worked in bed, leaving it in busy times only four or five hours a day. It was thus that he composed "La Dame Blanche." One morning when Adam called, as usual, the master complained to him that, after having racked his brains during the whole night, he could find nothing for his third act except a treble aria, an unimportant little chorus, a trifling duet for female voices, and a finale without any development.

"I should have a great piece for effect," he continued, "and I have only a meagre chorus of villagers exclaiming *Vive, vive Monseigneur*! Scribe has written on the margin that the peasants must throw their caps aloft, a proof that the passage must be animated and brief. They cannot throw their caps in the air for a quarter of an hour. An idea struck me last night, however, which may be worth something. I was reading in Walter Scott that an individual, returning to his native country after a long absence, hears from afar and recognizes an air which he had known in his childhood. If, instead of a chorus of acclamation, the villagers sang to Georges an old Scotch ballad which he would sufficiently remember to be able to take it up and continue it, don't you think that the situation would be musical?"

"Certainly," replied the pupil. "It could be charming and you would fill up your third act very nicely."

"Yes, but I have no words for that," objected Boieldieu.

"M. Scribe lives close by."

"I cannot go to him, sick as I am."

"But I am perfectly well and will go at once."

Without waiting for an answer, Adam ran over to Scribe's who resided at a very short distance. Scribe accepted the idea even more eagerly than the young disciple had done.

"Go back to Boieldieu," said he, "tell him that it is excellent; that there is a great success in it; that the third act is safe, and that he will have his words in a quarter of an hour."

The pupil hastily returned with the good news to his master, and the next morning he had the pleasure of hearing that delicious piece which did not indeed create the success of "La Dame Blanche," but tended powerfully to increase it.

I have mentioned the facility with which the whole opera was composed, but there is another interesting anecdote about what may be termed the spindle-complets, which deserves to be published, as illustrating the accidents to which strokes of genius are often indebted. One evening, the same Adam went to Boieldieu's for his lesson. The two were alone and the master repeated a few stanzas which he had set to music the day before. They did not appear to the pupil as altogether worthy of the rest of the work, and without venturing to express an opinion, his countenance must have sufficiently indicated his thoughts, for Boieldieu seized the occasion to prove that he too was dissatisfied with himself, and before the young man had time to interpose a word, he tore up the complets and flung them into the basket. At the exclamations which Adam uttered over this unexpected display of vivacity, the wife of the composer rushed into the room, and it was against her that Boieldieu turned his wrath.

"Here," said he, "is one who is honest. He considered the bars detestable which you wanted me to keep. He has not disguised it. I have destroyed them and will write others."

It was in vain that the pupil tried to excuse himself by protesting that he had said nothing. The master would not listen to reason, and accused his wife of weakness for his productions. She, on the other hand, reproached Adam with not sparing her husband who was killing himself with work, and she added that he was waiting in good taste and friendship.

To escape from this storm, the young man had no other alternative than a hasty retreat, and, the next day, at the lesson hour, when he was obliged to return, he felt considerable embarrassment. He rang the bell timidly, fearing to meet some angry face at the door, but the first person he saw was Madame Boieldieu, whose countenance was radiant.

"Ah, my poor Adam," she exclaimed, "but you did well to make him re-write his complets. After your departure yesterday he found others. And he has written nothing prettier."

She drew him to the piano where Boieldieu was singing to old Mother Desbrosses the touching and warmly-coloured strophes: "*Tournez, tournez, lègers, tournez, O glorieux spindles*." Boieldieu desired Madame Desbrosses to sing them to him, but the venerable artist wept with pleasure and sympathy, and was unable to proceed, and all the others wept with her. Ten years later, these tears were renewed when this same air was played at Pere La Chaise as the coffin of the illustrious composer was lowered to its last resting place.

III.

It was only a few evenings ago that I assisted at a concert given by one of the best orchestras of the country. I sat in a corner with a programme in my hand, but had not looked at it, when suddenly I heard a passage in which the soft strains of the violins answered, in an echo, the veiled thunder of the cellos and counter-basses. It was the beautiful overture of "La Dame Blanche," and I murmured the words—

La Dame Blanche vous regarde.
La Dame Blanche vous entend.
Prenez garde!

And as the music proceeded, I recalled the singular circumstances under which this overture was composed. The opera had been mounted in three weeks. At one of the last rehearsals, the faithful Adam, with others of his fellow-pupils, was in the pit with Boieldieu. Pixerecourt, the manager of the theatre, was in a balcony on the left. After the piece, entitled the "duet of fear," had been repeated, he called out to Boieldieu:—

"This duo is too long. There is too much music in the act."

"Very well," replied Boieldieu, "let us cut it down. I am not particular."

"But we are very particular," interposed the great artists, Pouchard and Madame Boulanger, who created respectively the rôles of Georges and Jenny. And it is due to them that the little gem was saved.

This rehearsal appeared so satisfactory that the manager decided the opera should be performed two days thereafter. Boieldieu remonstrated, saying that it was impossible as he had not commenced his overture, and was unable to write it in so brief an interval.

"That is none of my business," replied the matter-of-fact manager. "We will do without an overture if we must, but the work is ready, the contract is explicit, and 'La Dame Blanche' will be played the day after to-morrow."

"Ah, my children," said Boieldieu, turning to his two favourite pupils, Labarre, the celebrated harpist, and Adam, "do not abandon me or I am lost. I cannot leave a work of this importance without an overture, and unless you assist me I shall never be able to get through it."

The two disciples followed their master home and the labour was soon distributed among them. Boieldieu took for himself the introduction, and the three devised the plan of the *allégro*. They first selected the motives. Labarre proposed, and caused to be adopted, as a first theme, one of the British airs which he had heard in England when giving harp-concerts there, and which had been employed in the first chorus. Adam proposed for the second theme to take up in *allegro* the *andante* of a certain trio. For the final *coda* Boieldieu referred them to the "Telemaque," one of the operas composed by him in Russia, in which his pupils were to find the elements of the peroration.

The three worked steadily. At eleven o'clock Boieldieu had almost finished his introduction. Labarre bent over to the table where Adam sat, and whispering to him that he must absolutely go away, stepped out of the room. As he did not return, Boieldieu inquired about his absence. Adam was forced to confess that he was gone for the night.

"Ah, then, it is all over," exclaimed Boieldieu, "my overture will not be finished. And the copyist who is to be here at six o'clock in the morning! I am tired out and must go to bed, but you will keep on working. Be careful, however, to give nothing to the copyist without showing it to me."

Adam relates in a humorous strain that, having finished the overture at four o'clock in the morning, he placed the score in a conspicuous part of the dining-room where it could easily be found and, proud of the idea of at length being able to hear music written by himself alone without review or correction, he took good care not to awake Boieldieu, but went to sleep on a lounge in the drawing-room. At ten o'clock, he was aroused by the voice of Boieldieu who inquired how things stood. Being informed of all that had happened, and that the score had been duly carried off by the copyist, he scolded his presumptuous disciple and sent him to the theatre to recover the manuscript. Adam acknowledges that he did not perform this errand, but, pretending to return from the theatre, stated to his master that the sheets had been distributed to a number of copyists and that it was impossible to recover a single one. That night, at rehearsal, he hid himself in a corner to hear his part of the overture. All was going well, when suddenly, at a *forte*, a fearful discord broke out. He had transposed the parts of the horns and trumpets which were not in the same tone. The whole orchestra stopped. Kreuze, the conductor, consulted the score.

"What in the deuce have you put here?" said he to Boieldieu. "This is not your writing."

The composer, who was naturally quite confused, explained the matter by saying that, being very much fatigued the night before, he had dictated to Adam, who probably was not quite awake himself and had blundered. The mistake was soon repaired, and the rehearsal went on without further mishap. After the success of "La Dame Blanche," Boieldieu wished to rewrite the overture, but he never did so, and it remains as it was first composed, with the rare advantage to recommend it that it precedes a masterpiece.

IV.

It is just fifty years ago that "La Dame Blanche" was first performed at the Theatre Royal de l'Opéra Comique, in Paris. The original cast is worthy of record. Anne, the White Lady, was represented by Mme. Rigaut; Jenny, by Mme. Boulanger, one of the most genial celebrities of the French stage; Georges, the young English officer, by the famous tenor, Pouchard; Gaveston, the wicked intendant of Avenel, by Henry, and the faithful farmer Dikson, by Ferrol. Roger, the renowned tenor, was later gloriously associated with the rôle of Georges Brown. The opera crossed the channel almost at once, and so far back as 1826, I find an adaptation for Drury Lane, under the title of "The White Lady; or, the Spirit of Avenel." In this piece, among other performers, figured the names of Miss Kelly, the celebrated actress, and Charles Horn, afterwards connected with "Casper" and "Cherry Ripe." Another version was produced under the auspices of Madame Vestris, at Covent Garden, and Henry Phillips greatly distinguished himself in the part of Gaveston. I do not know what version Miss Kellogg intends to use in her promised reproduction of the opera,

but I believe that the Covent Garden adaptation was pretty faithful to the original, retaining all its essential features. The music of the part of Jenny is particularly well suited to the dramatic character of the rôle and will not prove too much of a strain. The part of Gaveston will I am certain, find a forcible, eloquent and picturesque interpreter in Mr. Henry Peakes. If the opera is properly mounted, I venture to predict that it will prove both an artistic and professional success. But, beforehand, in the name of all lovers of music, and out of respect for the memory of Boieldieu, I demand that the opera be given entire, without excisions, and especially without interpolations.

The exquisite Scotch ballad "Robin Adair" runs through the opera of "La Dame Blanche" like a silver thread, weaving its parts together, and appearing alone at intervals with the full force of orchestration. The idea is a novel one in composition, and proved so successful that it suggested to Flotow a similar introduction of the Irish song, "The Last Rose of Summer," in his "Martha." Auber made a like use of the beautiful air "Sur ce rocher lointain," or, as it is known among us, "On yonder rock reclining," with striking effect in "Fra Diavolo," and notably in the last scene of the third act, when the bold bandit steps down promptly from the high rocks near Terracina, in bottle-green tunic, white-plumed hat, and rifle on shoulder, while Beppe kneels in the valley, with outstretched arms begging pardon for his treachery, and the orchestra murmurs the sweet air in *maestrosissimo* style. The idea of introducing "Robin Adair" into his opera came to Boieldieu as I have related in the beginning of this paper. The work of Walter Scott which the composer was reading in bed when the selection dawned upon his fancy was "Guy Mannering," and the hero who hears a song of his childhood, on returning to his native village, and joins in the refrain, is no other than Henry Bertram. Thus it is that both "Guy Mannering" and "The Moonshiner" enter into the collection of "La Dame Blanche." Rossini drew the inspiration of "La Donna del Lago," and Donizetti, that of his delicious "Lucia," from the same author. The ballad of "Robin Adair" is further associated with one of the most romantic incidents of Boieldieu's domestic career—a tale of love and life's spring time which has all the charm of a pastoral. But the rehearsal of that lovely and pathetic story would require a paper all its own.

It will be more to the purpose to subjoin a few paragraphs on the initial steps of Boieldieu's artistic existence, with the view of showing how his true vocation was decided, for, like many other gifted youths before and since, he began life by mistaking his powers and going altogether wrong. It was in the year 1795. The Reign of Terror was over, and art, like a flower, was covering many a moral, social and material ruin in France. The history of art during the French Revolution is a most curious study which deserves to be better known than it has hitherto been. Boieldieu was only twenty years of age. He had already written a great deal and had even ventured on a little opera which was represented with applause in Rouen, his native city. By the advice of his friends, and especially of his master, the organist of the Cathedral of Rouen, he was emboldened to try his fortune on the Parisian stage. The chief composers of that period in the capital were Cherubini, Méhul, Kreutzer and Jadin. The name of the two former is world-wide; that of the two latter is mainly confined to France. These celebrities were in the habit of dining together every ten days and making music to each other, thus diverting their minds from the anxieties and perils of that turbulent epoch. To one of these dinners young Boieldieu had the honour of being admitted on the strength of his meritorious musical beginnings. He cut rather a sorry figure during the repast, being awed by the presence and the brilliant conversation of his illustrious hosts. But Kreutzer took pity on him and did his best to put him at his ease. After the dinner, he proposed that Boieldieu should station himself at the piano and rehearse his opera. The youth was an excellent pianist and had a most agreeable tenor voice, but the judges were not men to be blinded by the mere charm of execution. Every now and then, the poor young man saw a long thin finger sweep slowly down upon his score, pointing to some fault in harmony or other musical selection of which he was wholly unconscious. This was the finger of Cherubini, the most terrible and inexorable of censors. Boieldieu was both discouraged and terrified, but he went on with his play. At length hope began to dawn in his heart as he noticed that Cherubini's finger ceased to appear upon his paper. "The middle of my opera," thought he, "is worth more than the beginning. Perhaps the end will crown the whole." Suddenly he came to a passage which had been highly successful at Rouen, and which, he felt sure, would carry the judges with him. He stopped as if to ask their counsel, and hearing nothing, turned round, when, to his shame and consternation, he found that the room was empty. His hearers convinced of the worthlessness of the composition, but unwilling to dash the feelings of the young aspirant by expressing their verdict, had quietly slipped out of the apartment. Boieldieu burst into tears, threw up his arms and was about giving way to despair, when Jadin, the youngest of his judges, returned. "My young friend," said he, "do not grow desperate. One may be a very skillful musician without being able to write an opera. You are a good pianist; you have a fine